

**From:** [Cass Fairbanks](#)  
**To:** [Greg Bailey](#)  
**Subject:** Character Letter for Tonia Haddix  
**Date:** Thursday, June 26, 2025 9:56:55 AM

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**Cassandra MacDonald**

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June 26, 2025

**The Hon. Stephen R. Clark**

United States District Judge

United States District Court

Eastern District of Missouri

111 S. 10th Street

St. Louis, MO 63102

**Re: Character Letter on Behalf of Tonia Haddix**

Dear Judge Clark,

My name is Cassandra MacDonald, and I am writing this letter in support of Tonia Haddix, whom I have known for almost five years. I respectfully ask you to consider this letter as part of your evaluation of her character during the sentencing process.

Despite how tough she may sometimes act, Tonia is one of the most compassionate and devoted individuals I have ever known. Her love and care for both humans and animals, especially the chimpanzee at the center of this case, has always been sincere and deeply felt. I understand that she is facing sentencing in a matter involving her refusal to relinquish Tonka the chimp. While I am not writing to excuse or justify the legal aspects of the case, I can speak personally to Tonia's motivations, which I believe were firmly rooted in love, loyalty, and what she felt was her moral obligation to protect an animal she considered part of her family.

What may appear to some as defiance or hostility was, in Tonia's heart, a desperate act of love. She has always been deeply committed

to the well-being of the animals in her care. I have seen firsthand how she has poured her time, energy, and resources into providing and caring for them, often at great personal expense and sacrifice. This includes spending tens of thousands of dollars improving a property that she did not even own to make sure the animals there were safe and provided for.

Her bond with Tonka was not casual or superficial, it was one of daily care, emotional connection, and heartfelt responsibility. Many people say they would do anything for their dogs or cats, as they are considered members of their family, this is no different. It is perhaps even more valid in Tonia's case, as communication between humans and primates is so much more profound.

When I first met Tonia, I was in a bad place personally having moved to a new state after a bad situation at my home. I was isolating myself from most people. We began speaking constantly and she would check in on me more than my own family did despite barely knowing me at the time.

As a journalist with a certification in Chimpanzee Behavior and Conservation from Duke University, I also became interested in her case and covered it extensively, including visiting while she was caring for the chimps prior to the original seizure.

I watched as she communicated with them, and they communicated back. It appeared clear to me, and my family who was with me, that these were mutual emotional relationships. They cared for her as she cared for them. They trusted her, and she trusted them. Their enclosures were clean, they had fresh food and water, and expansive areas to run and play. As an animal lover and someone who has studied and cared for primates myself, I did not see any red flags that the animals were being mistreated in any way.

Throughout the years, I have seen her stand up for people being bullied and put herself in the crossfire, rescue animals from bad

situations and get them safety, and help many people including some that may not have even deserved such kindness.

It is this trusting and compassionate nature that I believe led to her being exploited and manipulated by many people, perhaps most of all, the documentary crew. This should not reflect poorly on her character however, but on theirs.

I truly believe that Tonia would do almost anything to help even a stranger if they asked or she saw that they needed it.

Tonia is not someone who acts out of selfishness or disregard for others. She is a deeply emotional and empathetic person, someone who consistently shows up for her community, her friends, and especially the creatures that cannot speak for themselves. She has a generous and nurturing spirit that has led to her being a nurse and fostering children. She tries to share her love of animals with everyone, so that they feel that love and desire to protect them as well.

While she may have made choices that brought her before the Court, those choices came from a place of love, not malice.

I ask that you take into account the sincerity of her intentions and the kind of person Tonia truly is. She is so much more than the character they turned her into on television.

A more lenient sentence would allow her to continue being a positive presence in the lives of those around her. She has already endured tremendous emotional and financial hardship through this process, and I believe she is sincerely remorseful for the consequences of her actions, even though her heart was in the right place. She is not a danger to the community, but a positive light in it. One that will be deeply missed if it is taken away for even a moment.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter and for considering it

in your sentencing decision.

Please feel free to contact me if I can provide any further information.

Respectfully,

**Cassandra MacDonald**

**Mary Vesci**

340 Westminster Glen Carbon, IL 62034

missrex3@aol.com. (618)531-3584

June 24, 2025

The Hon. Stephen R. Clark  
United States District Judge  
United States District Court  
Eastern District of Missouri  
111 S. 10th Street  
St. Louis, MO 63102

RE: Character Reference for Tonia Haddix

Dear Judge Clark,

I'm writing to offer a character reference for Tonia Haddix, whom I have had the pleasure of knowing personally for the past two years. I met Tonia and her husband Jerry during the opening weekend of their safari in Sunrise Beach, Missouri in 2023, and we quickly became friends through our shared love of animals.

Tonia is one of the most generous, compassionate, and kind-hearted individuals I have ever met. Her commitment to the care, enrichment, and wellbeing of animals is so inspiring. Since meeting her, I have been volunteering at her safari, witnessing firsthand her dedication and tireless effort to provide a safe and enriching environment for the animals in her care. If someone has an animal in need, Tonia is the first one to step in and take care of it.

Tonia has also extended her passion for animals and education to the broader community. For the past two years, she has enthusiastically participated in "Safari Week" at a camp for adults with mental challenges, bringing animals to share and educate the campers. Her kindness, patience, and compassion shine through during these visits, making a lasting impression on all those involved.

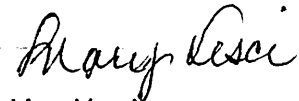
She has similarly impacted the many children who visit the safari on field trips. Tonia takes the time to educate young visitors, fostering respect for animals and their natural world.

She has not only enriched the lives of those animals she cares for but has made me, and many others, better people through her example.

Outside of the safari, my husband and I have enjoyed a warm friendship with Tonia and Jerry, sharing dinners, boat rides and heartfelt conversations. Tonia is always ready with a listening ear and never lets anyone walk away without a hug. She is grateful, sincere, and full of life, showing her huge heart to everyone she meets.

I am proud to know Tonia and to call her my friend. She is a woman of deep compassion, integrity, and commitment, and I respectfully ask that you take this into consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mary Vesci". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Mary" and last name "Vesci" clearly distinguishable.

Mary Vesci

Penny Healzer  
1460 DuEllo Road  
Lake St. Louis, MO 63367  
314-707-6238  
[phmonkeylady@gmail.com](mailto:phmonkeylady@gmail.com)

June 20, 2025

The Honorable Stephen R. Clark  
United States District Judge  
United States District Court  
Eastern District of Missouri  
111 South 10<sup>th</sup> Street  
St. Louis, Missouri 63102

Re: Character Reference for Tonia Haddix

Dear Judge Clark,

My name is Penny Healzer, and I am a retired labor and delivery nurse. I am writing to you on behalf of my friend, Tonia Haddix, who is being sentenced before your court. I have known Tonia since 2017, when we met at Connie Casey's facility. She came there, not knowing Connie personally, but out of her love for primates and a desire to help. Since that time, I have come to know her as one of the most devoted, compassionate, and selfless people I have ever met.

Tonia has spent years rescuing and caring for primates, many of them elderly, disabled, or discarded by others. She has taken in handicapped monkeys and provided them with round-the-clock care; cleaning, feeding, arranging vet care, and giving them the love and dignity every living being deserves. Her love for animals isn't casual, it's her life. She has helped others who couldn't afford medical care for their monkeys, never asking for anything in return.

When she began helping at Connie's, she immediately threw herself into making life better for the chimpanzees. Despite having no formal role or compensation, she paid for vet care, cleaned and painted the facility,

provided enrichment and nutrition, and spent hours playing with and loving those animals. Her devotion was unmistakable, and it came straight from the heart. She brought energy joy and love into that facility. The chimps adored her and she adored them. It was her calling.

Tonia is also the best kind of friend, a person you can always count on. She has experienced deep personal losses in her life. She lost her first husband to cancer in her twenties while raising two children, and despite being divorced from her second husband, she helped care for him and support him thorough his final illness. She worked as a nurse to support her family and has always been someone who puts others before herself. She became a foster mother in her early twenties and later adopted her daughter, who has fetal alcohol syndrome, and continues to love and support her through every challenge. Despite these hardships, she always put others, both people and animals, before herself. She is kind, dependable, and responsible. I have seen her work harder than anyone I know, even showing up to care for animals in a dress, sandals with full hair and make-up, never afraid to get dirty.

Her childhood was far from easy. After losing her biological father at a young age, she was raised in a household that suffered with instability and at times, lacked basic necessities like electricity. Her mother had mental health issues that made Tonia's early life unpredictable and emotionally difficult. While her stepfather provided some stability the trauma of her upbringing left lasting scars. A therapist has since diagnosed Tonia with PTSD, and I know she is now in counseling and working hard to address the pain of her past.

Tonia loved Tonka deeply. Her actions, however misguided, came from a place of overwhelming love and desperation. She has expressed deep remorse for her decision to mislead the court, and I know this weighs heavily on her. She knows she made a serious mistake, and I have personally heard the heartbreak and guilt in her voice many times. She let her love for the animals, and for Tonka, cloud her judgement, and she deeply regrets misleading the Court, and she fully understands the seriousness of that mistake.

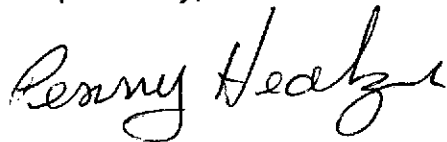
Your Honor, Tonia is not a danger to society. Sending her to jail would help no one. Not the community, not the animals who still rely on her, and not Tonia herself. She is already carrying the burden of her mistake every single



day. She is not a criminal at heart, she is a caregiver a nurturer, and someone who simply let emotion override reason. I respectfully ask the Court to consider her lifetime of service, compassion, and good character when determining her sentence. Incarcerating her would not serve the animals who still depend on her, nor would it bring healing to what has already been a painful and humbling chapter in her life.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my words. Please feel free to contact me if you need any further information.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Penny Healzer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, stylized 'P' and 'H'.

Penny Healzer